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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 005497

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#) [FARC](#)

SUBJECT: COLAR PREDICTS ESCALATION BEFORE NEGOTIATION

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Reason: 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

11. (S) Commanders of Joint Task Force Omega (JTF-O), the Colombian military's elite force at the core of the Plan Patriota campaign, see the conflict with the FARC entering a phase of more direct confrontation. They contend the FARC has determined it cannot withstand four more years under re-elected President Uribe, and hence it will try to gain a position of strength from which to enter peace negotiations. Commanders believe the FARC wants to pressure Bogota, by regaining territory lost in the first phase of Plan Patriota.

An escalating campaign would pose tough challenges to COLMIL's stretched resources, especially in helicopter mobility, as well as to its internal coordination and underemphasized civil affairs work. End Summary.

Renewed FARC Assertiveness

12. (S) On June 8 US MILGROUP Commander visited the command of Joint Task Force Omega (JTF-O), which prosecutes Plan Patriota in FARC heartlands, to discuss ongoing operations and near-term outlook. JTF-O commanders anticipate that a new and more direct phase of the conflict is approaching. Instead of the COLMIL's active pursuit of the FARC in defensive retreat, the pattern will shift to one in which the FARC will move to the strategic offensive, trying to regain territory in the JTF-O area of operation (AO) and provoking head-on confrontation. Current intelligence already indicates movement of some 500 guerrillas into JTF-O's AO on the Sumapaz plateau in Cundinamarca Department, a strategic gateway to Bogota.

FARC Sights on Bogota

13. (S) Seizure of Bogota remains the FARC's principal objective, according to JTF-O commanders. They believe the struggle now occurring west of La Macarena around La Uribe is aimed at the establishment of an intermediate rear-guard in sufficient strength to project and support an effort directed against Bogota. The FARC's principal rear-guard remains in its historic safe haven further south, but in the early days of Plan Patriota, the FARC learned from hard experience that lines of communication from the despeje were too long to protect its operations in Cundinamarca.

Maneuvering for Talks

14. (S) The FARC's new assertiveness is ironically born of weakness. Plan Patriota deprived the FARC of its safe haven (despeje) and dispersed its forces. Under sustained COLMIL operations the FARC has suffered higher casualties, forced mobility, and inability to aggregate. Its supply and communication lines are interdicted. These factors have taken a heavy toll on FARC morale and discipline, as well as hindering recruitment and boosting desertion. In JTF-O commanders' view, the about-face from a FARC defensive to an offensive posture is triggered by President Uribe's re-election and by the FARC's strategic determination that it cannot withstand another four years of this military pressure. The FARC's drive to regain territory, according to the commanders, is motivated by a desire to enter peace talks -- in a position of greater military strength and hence greater negotiating leverage.

COLMIL Challenges

15. (S) The commanders said the GOC shares the same goal of entering talks in a dominant position, and it will fight to sustain pressure on the FARC. The next phase of the conflict will be about stamina and staying power, which poses tough challenges for the COLMIL:

- Helicopters: this is a long-standing issue. Already stretched, Omega's helicopter assets have been drawn off to support other areas, including high value target (HVT) missions.

- U.S. support: this concern applies most to the logistical area. Although U.S. support meets only about 24 per cent of COLMIL requirements, this assistance enables movement of supplies as well as troop evacuations and rotations, which are vital to morale and discipline.

- Organizational hurdles: commanders retain the mind set of war fighters within their respective armed services rather than providers to a collaborative joint force. The COLAR cares little, the commanders said, for the Mobile Brigades that fight in the Omega area. Continued duplication by units pursuing the same HVT targets is evidence of this phenomenon: whichever service develops target information is the one to pursue it on any given occasion. Sister services are often unaware of one another's activities.

- Civil affairs: JTF-O commanders stressed that social and economic development work by the GOC's USAID-equivalent Accion Integral was the key to defeating the FARC. Omega officers lamented the lack of GOC development programs in their AO. The COLMIL, they said, can improve the security situation but cannot sustain that progress without significant GOC local presence.

An Alternate View

16. (S) There are observers who believe the FARC, having waited over 40 years, may wait four more years in the hope that Uribe's successor will be someone of the left who would be easier to deal with. Meanwhile, the drug trade is so lucrative they can afford to wait. These observers usually point out the FARC "do not think like us," and therefore it is difficult to predict their actions.

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